The Psychology Department

March 29, 2013

President’s Note: In my first column for the Observer, I wrote briefly about the great value that psychology departments have in institutions of higher education in the areas of teaching, research, and service. In this month’s column, Ruth V. Watkins, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, provides a more in-depth insight into the contributions the department of psychology makes to the university from her perspective as a college dean. Dean Watkins is a behavioral scientist; she is a member of the faculty of the Department of Speech and Hearing Science. Her research interests are in communication development and disabilities, including prevention of disability in populations who are at risk. The department of psychology at the University of Illinois is one of the premier departments in the country with more than 55 faculty in research and teaching areas that include behavioral neuroscience, clinical/community, cognitive, cognitive neuroscience, developmental, industrial-organizational, quantitative, social-personality, and visual cognition and human performance. —Joseph E. Steinmetz

You learn a great deal as dean of a College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. For example, you discover stunningly positive contributions of the scholars within your institution that you didn’t know before you were dean. Perhaps the greatest opportunity of the role is the deep insights you gain into the strengths and challenges of your college, particularly the elements of the college that deeply influence the success of your campus. Psychology is one of those premier academic units.

We read almost daily about the changing landscape of public higher education, from a traditional funding model that is no longer viable, to concerns about access for talented students independent of financial backgrounds, to questions of the relevance of scholarship for the broader society. Those of us in large land-grant research universities are in essence reshaping the university to address the needs and concerns of the 21st century. Psychology is fully engaged in every dimension of the land-grant mission, and accordingly is central to (re)defining the land-grant mission from a 21st century perspective to a vibrant future for the large public research university.

Below are a few examples of the new land-grant university in action at Illinois.
Undergraduate Education. At Illinois, psychology is one of the largest undergraduate majors on campus, serving a higher proportion of students from diverse backgrounds than the campus average, and attracting a large number of first-generation college students. Nearly half of the students are involved in research with a faculty member at some point during their undergraduate years, gaining the type of engaged experience that promotes meaningful learning and a lifelong connection to the institution; it is an effort highlighted each semester when a research fair is convened to showcase the psychology department’s research opportunities. Psychology is also a leader on campus in promoting access to quality educational experiences.

External Funding. Psychology is a well-funded department, active in securing external grant support, corporate engagement with research, and private giving. As we redefine the land-grant institution in the 21st century, the traditional state funding base has to be supplemented (or even supplanted) by grants, and corporate and private support, in addition to tuition. Our future success will rest on our effectiveness in garnering support from new sources. Psychology is a model department in its ability to effectively compete in these external arenas.

Scholarship. Scholarship in psychology is central to many pressing societal issues. Illinois is focusing research activity in six major themes, among them health and wellness, social equality and cultural understanding, education, and economic development. Psychology researchers are instrumental in advancing the impact of campus scholarship in these areas, and in collaborating with partners beyond the campus to address community, local, state, and national concerns. Psychology is a key player in Illinois’s research agenda, and psychology faculty are prominently placed leaders of interdisciplinary institutes and initiatives.

Alumni Relations. Psychology has a large and active alumni community. Psychology at Illinois has a vibrant Alumni Board that has taken a leading role in fostering fundraising for departmental needs, and in creating internship opportunities for undergraduate students. In the new land-grant institution, the involvement of a vocal, supportive external body is essential.

In summary, psychology is a leading department in positioning the land-grant university for success and impact in the 21st century. From the perspective of a dean, it is difficult to imagine a department that is more critical to this agenda, or more effective in these efforts.